

Spring 2013

One Stitch at a Time: Empowering Women Through Fair Trade Clothing in Sub-Saharan Africa

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One Stitch at a Time

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Empowering Women Through Fair Trade Clothing In Sub-Saharan Africa

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April 6, 2013

Abstract

This thesis aims to determine if fair trade clothing is an effective model to empower women throughout sub-Saharan Africa and to analyze its effectiveness in addressing issues that women throughout this region face every day. The analysis focuses on three specific forms of empowerment; economic, social, and political in order to break down the specific efforts of fair trade clothing, determining how this industry is able to address all of these aspects leading to women's empowerment in sub-Saharan Africa. My research also includes literature detailing the start of the fair trade industry, critiques of fair trade and ways in which fair trade clothing specifically can improve the livelihoods of women. In analyzing the literature portraying efforts of fair trade to empower women, with examples and case studies of current organizations and businesses working to accomplish the same goal, I have concluded that fair trade clothing can effectively empower women in sub-Saharan Africa. While fair trade clothing can be an effective and sustainable model to promote women's empowerment, several different types of empowerment, between economic, social, and political forms, must be represented in the model in order for fair trade clothing to truly change and improve the lives of African women.

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I. Preface

The motivation for this research originates from a very personal place. After living in the country of Cameroon for five months and experiencing the beauty of the country as well as its many obvious issues first hand, I was forced to notice and understand the true lack of opportunities for African women. I realized in those five months that I, being a white woman born in the United States, had won the lottery. I have never before been forced to realize that just being born and raised where I was determined the amount of opportunities that I had throughout my life. Yet I observed women in Cameroon work harder every day to support themselves as well as their children and families than most Americans I know who are afforded many more opportunities. Therefore, when I stumbled across the opportunity to create a business venture using fair trade bags to help women in a rural village of Cameroon, I started wondering, how can this really help them? Hence I am interested in analyzing the true effects of fair trade clothing and whether it can really empower women in not only Cameroon but also determine its ability to address issues that women face all throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

II. Introduction

In her book *The Challenge for Africa*, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai states “Disempowerment-whether through a lack of self-confidence, apathy, fear or an inability to take charge of one’s own life is perhaps the most unrecognizable problem in Africa today” (Maathai 129). With half the population of sub-Saharan Africa living in poverty, Maathai addresses how this lack of empowerment has forced the majority of Africans to live on less than a dollar a day. While empowerment is such a powerful force in deciding the livelihoods for many Africans, it is African women who are most affected by this disempowerment. Though it is universally acknowledged that improving women’s livelihoods can lead to significant developmental opportunities for the population as a whole, African nations have struggled to improve women’s self-confidence and destroy barriers, preventing women from taking charge of their own lives and ultimately fix the issue of African disempowerment. It is due to the lack of efforts in working on these issues to progress towards women’s empowerment that women all over sub-Saharan Africa are forced into poverty due to a lack of access to economic, social and political opportunities. Therefore throughout this thesis, I look to find a solution to this issue of disempowerment through the fair trade clothing market, specifically analyzing in what ways can fair trade clothing empower women, economically, socially and politically in sub-Saharan Africa.

While there have been many different methods used to address women’s developmental needs in sub-Saharan Africa, these efforts don’t always tackle the lack of women’s empowerment within this region of the world. While the definition of empowerment has taken many different forms, according to one definition, empowerment

is the “the expansion of people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Meenai 72). Developmental progress needs to challenge women’s current roles within society as well as address the social, political and economic hurdles that they may face in their everyday lives; and the only way to accomplish all of these aspects is to effectively concentrate on women’s empowerment. “Two central components of empowerment are the agency and the resources needed to exercise life choices” (Upadhyay 78-89). Women in sub-Saharan Africa have been consistently denied the resources to make these important life choices and therefore women are struggling to not only support themselves, but in many situations, their entire family.

One of the most pressing problems preventing women’s empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa is uneven and unfair international trade. “The African peoples’ ability to engage in economic activities and creative initiatives that generate wealth are inhibited by mass-produced, imported consumer goods” (Maathai 95). While an inaccessible and extremely competitive global market has perpetuated the lack of development for the majority of African nations, women in this region again face extreme marginalization within their ability to access any of the international trading system. Allowing women in sub-Saharan Africa access to this international trading system can provide them the ability to empower themselves to overcome economic, social and political hurdles they face, however, due to severe gender inequalities plaguing this region, women continue to struggle to have access to the global market. Though there have been many developmental attempts to change this situation and help women in sub-Saharan Africa

access the international trading market, fair trade has become the most popular, and arguably the most successful.

With the ability to provide economic access and living wages, fair trade is giving women the option to become self-sufficient and creating opportunities out of poverty. Fair trade organizations are not only helping producers in developing countries to first overcome the struggle of entering the international market, but fair trade is also providing an opportunity for developing countries to trade their products across the world in a more free, fair and sustainable manner. With the help of fair trade practices, many organizations have begun to mix the need for women's empowerment through the simple idea of making clothing or textiles to sell around the world. While the research on fair trade organizations and its effects on women have been collected, mainly in regards to coffee, farming and cocoa, fair trade clothing in particular has not seen as much attention. Though the specific sector of clothing within fair trade is relatively new and has not been analyzed to the extent of more popular fair trade sectors, the clothing sector also has the ability to allow for many influential impacts on women's empowerment around the developing world.

My overarching goal throughout this thesis is to explore the niche industry of fair trade clothing and to analyze its abilities to empower women, and possibly be an alternative to other forms of aid and development. Therefore, throughout this paper I ultimately look to answer the question, in what ways is fair trade clothing an effective model to empower women in sub-Saharan Africa? My research focuses on three main forms of empowerment through the use of fair trade clothing: economic, social, and political. Each section will give a critical analysis of the specific ways fair trade clothing

can accomplish issues that African women face regularly in all three categories. The first section of this paper will look into the economic benefits that fair trade clothing can have for women. This section will analyze the economic hurdles that can be overcome through the production of fair trade clothing by women. Items addressed will include, women in international trade, a self-sufficient income, and the power of sewing. The second section will address specific social issues women face in sub-Saharan Africa, such as lack of women's rights and safety, their current roles within the household and society as well as touching on the important issue of HIV. Finally the last piece analyzed will be the political standing of women, analyzing women's accessibility to decision-making positions, their legal rights, as well as their roles within the governmental sector. All three sections will include an analysis of these issues, specific ways and examples fair trade clothing promotes empowerment, as well as include instances of current fair trade organizations' efforts to address some of these specific problems that women face around the world every day. This thesis will ultimately be the first analysis bridging the efforts of fair trade clothing with examples of how these efforts can effectively address all the listed issues that still occur for women in sub-Saharan Africa today.

In her book *Dead Aid*, Dambisa Moyo portrays a hypothetical situation of a Hollywood celebrity sending millions of dollars' worth of malaria fighting bug nets to a country in Africa, in hopes of accomplishing a good deed. And while the celebrity's bug nets have been successfully distributed throughout this region, the market in this country is now essentially flooded with foreign nets, putting the local bug net producers out of business, not only effecting the business owners but the possible 150 dependent workers as well. Through this story, Moyo is portraying the popular Micro-Macro paradox of aid.

A short-term efficacious intervention may have few discernable, sustainable long-terms benefits. Worse still, it can unintentionally undermine whatever fragile chance of sustainable development may already be in play...In nearly all cases, short term aid evaluations give the erroneous impression of aid's success. But short-term evaluations are scarcely relevant when trying to tackle Africa's long-term problems (Moyo 44-45).

It is mainly due to this popular aspect of aid that development in this region of the world continues to be a struggle, showing very little success. With billions of dollars of aid being unaccounted for and ineffective, while long-term development continues to be ignored, it is becoming more and more important that "aid with effectiveness" starts to arise. Therefore, there is significant importance in looking into the question of the possible effectiveness of fair trade clothing from an academic standpoint in order to find a potential addition, or solution, to effective and sustainable aid for this region.

According to Moyo "Aid effectiveness should be measured against its contribution to long-term sustainable growth, and whether it moves the greatest number of people out of poverty in a sustainable way" (Moyo 44-45). Fair trade has shown to work as an alternative for many regions of the world promoting "trade not aid" in order to avoid the destructive micro-macro paradox. And though specific fair trade sectors such as coffee, farming, and cocoa have been previously researched, analyzed, and even criticized at times, the clothing sector in particular has not yet been examined. Therefore there is a pressing need to academically analyze this industry in order to determine its true impacts. And while fair trade clothing is becoming more and more popular for consumers as well as producers around the world, with businesses like Toms shoes, which bridges clothing and cause, it's becoming more important to look into this industry to see if it is truly being effective.

When addressing this question, I ultimately make the argument that fair trade clothing can empower women in sub-Saharan Africa. However, I also make the case that fair trade clothing only has the ability to empower women effectively if all areas are addressed properly and women have multiple support methods, therefore fair trade clothing will be effective if several different support systems are included within the fair trade organization. These support methods will ultimately permit fair trade clothing to be effective in empowering women in sub-Saharan Africa, allowing women a sustainable opportunity out of poverty, one stitch at a time.

III. Literature Review

The goal of my research is to demonstrate the possible impacts that the production of fair trade clothing can have on women's empowerment focusing in the region of sub-Saharan Africa. I have gathered several books and articles that examine each of the variables, laying important groundwork for my further analysis and research. The subsections below cover: the role of women in sub-Saharan Africa today, the limits they face, a background of fair trade and its current work towards women's empowerment.

Context of Gender Inequality in Sub-Saharan Africa

While women still face great challenges to gain equality all over the world today, sub-Saharan Africa continues to include many of the worst countries in gender inequality. According to the Atlas of Gender and Development from 2010, "Gender discrimination in social institutions is very high in the 44 sub-Saharan African countries. Of the ranked countries, all except six are in the bottom half of SIGI (Social Institutions and Development Index). Just one - Mauritius - is in the top 20 ("Sub-Saharan Africa" 192-193). The "promotion of gender equality and empowering women" is also the third goal set by the United Nations under their millennium development goals; however, significant progress towards a solution of this issue has yet to be seen, especially in sub-Saharan Africa ("UN News Center"). With cultural, religious, and developmental barriers, gender inequality has been difficult to challenge within this region of the world. "The vision of gender equality in the development process across the African continent has ultimately not been woman friendly. In most cases women continue to be perceived in terms of childbearing, procreation, and household economy functions" (Njogu, and

Orchardson-Mazuri). Thus very few perceptions of women's roles within the African society have been changed, despite previous developmental attempts.

Due to excessive gender inequalities and lack of opportunities, most women are therefore forced into a life of poverty.

Gender discrimination resulting in greater poverty among women is widespread throughout the developing world. However, the incidence of women's poverty, as well as its depth and their vulnerability, is particularly marked in Sub-Saharan African countries (McFerson 50-72).

While this is an imperative issue that has been affecting the success of many developing nations throughout the world, sub-Saharan Africa remains one of the most affected regions, demonstrating that due to these inequalities and lack of opportunities, women often have to struggle living on less than a dollar a day. "The empirical evidence strongly supports the presumptions of gendered poverty and inequality in African countries as well as the close association between malgovernance and the special poverty problems of African women" (McFerson 50-72). With sub-Saharan Africa being one of the worst regions in gender discrimination against women, it is therefore placing these women into a life of poverty and hardship.

Issues Women Face Due to Gender Inequalities

Gender inequality forces women into impoverished living conditions daily due to social, economic, and political hurdles giving African women minimal options and opportunities. "Glaring gaps in policy, legal frameworks and investment opportunities make it difficult for women to perform to their full potential in social, economic and political spheres" (Njogu, and Orchardson-Mazuri). An example of a key issue that women face due to discrimination is access to land. "...Women's ownership rights

remain highly restricted in Sub-Saharan Africa. Discrimination is clearest in access to land, where traditional law often prevails” (“Sub-Saharan Africa” 192-193). The tradition takes place in that land is transferred from father to son, and women can only access it through marriage, despite the fact that women make up the majority of farm workers (“Sub-Saharan Africa” 192-193). This not only makes it extremely difficult for women to own land but can also make it hard for them to access loans.

These laws function as a handicap to women’s economic capabilities and perpetuate a culture of dependence. Yet the economic independence of women is a major stage in bridging inequalities, preventing violence and fostering self esteem and well-being (Njogu, and Orchardson-Mazuri).

The inability for women to own land has significant economic repercussions while also perpetuating a male dominated society, prolonging gender inequities throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

While access to land rights can economically impede women, social issues can also arise due to gender inequality. To truly understand the scope and severity of issues steaming from gender discrimination and the lack of women’s empowerment, the issue of HIV cannot be ignored. Due to the lack of opportunities for women in this region, many still have to find means to provide for themselves, and also at times their families, forcing many women into prostitution. “Informants argued that poverty robs women of the ability to fulfill their socially designated responsibilities and thus debases them, often forcing them into prostitution” (Mikell 313-319). Women are therefore sent into a spiral due to gender discrimination, first forced into poverty then influenced to be a prostitute, which is ultimately risking their lives due to the danger of contracting HIV.

By the 1980’s AIDS had transformed what was once a survival strategy into a route to early, painful death...Although infection is not confined to special “risk groups” rates are highest among people with multiple sexual partners; the more

partners the greater risk. Women sex workers are highest at risk for HIV (Mikell 313-319).

Women in sub-Saharan Africa are risking their lives essentially just to provide for themselves and others, yet many of these women do not have a choice. Even if women do not resort to prostitution they still face much of the backlash that comes with the taboo of AIDS. “Women, particularly those who seek to escape male control, are especially likely to be blamed for spreading STD’s... There is danger that moral panic will lead to roundups, witch hunting, and increased violence against women” (Mikell 313-319). Gender inequalities and a lack of women’s empowerment not only create extreme hurdles for these women, but they can ultimately place them into a life of hardship and possibly early death.

Another issue that women in sub-Saharan Africa regularly face due to the lack of empowerment is leadership opportunities. The lack of women’s leadership opportunities can be a serious economic and political issue as well. “While women constitute almost 55 percent of the African population, there are still a disproportionately low number of them in senior leadership positions in both the public and private sectors” (Dibie, and Dibie 95-122). Due to serious gender prejudices, women are not able to be apart of these important societal roles that could have substantial economic benefits for the entire nation. “While it appears that there are more women than men in the national, state and regional governments in several African nations, there are more men in the apex of leadership and political decision-making positions” (Dibie, and Dibie 95-122). Because of serious gender inequalities women face many challenges preventing them from obtaining these coveted positions, which could substantially improve their lives and

benefit the society as well. While these are just a few cases of gender inequalities that hinder women's livelihoods, there are still many others that need to be addressed.

It is very important to note that giving qualified women more senior public management positions in government organizations will galvanize the continent's bid for sustainable development. If economic, health, and social developments are expected to reach men and women equitably across the African continent, government and NGOs will have to engage as well as restructure their interest to address women's issues (Njogu, and Orchardson-Mazuri).

These issues will not only impede women's development, but they will also continue to hinder development for many African countries until they are confronted.

Fair Trade History and Purpose

The fair trade movement was originally created to enable and empower small-scale producers from developing countries to be able to access the international trade system in a more fair and sustainable manner. The first signs of the fair trade movement were reported after World War II, when fair trade organizations began to buy handcrafts from low-income women in Puerto Rico and Europe, and then changing their focus on helping producers from developing countries ("Fair Trade Resource Network"). However real economic and development work through fair trade didn't occur until the 1960s in Europe when the Dutch division of Oxfam opened its first shops selling goods produced by cooperatives in developing regions ("Fair Trade Resource Network"). "Around the same time the Dutch organization Max Havelaar created the first fair trade product certification system, for coffee, and label" ("Fair Trade Resource Network"). Today there has been a growing number of fair trade organizations within the United States, and all across the world, that understand this same need to raise awareness for even trade between developed and developing nations.

The definition of fair trade has also progressed over time, just as the fair trade movement has itself. However most fair trade operations follow several specific characteristics that set them apart from other types of businesses or organizations.

According to the World Fair Trade Organization:

Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect that seek greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair Trade Organizations, backed by consumers, are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade ("World Fair Trade Organization").

Therefore most fair trade organizations work to create a more equal and effective partnership with the consumer and producer to ensure fairness in the transaction and to lead to more sustainable development. The book, *Social Responsibility in the Global Market* also describes an alternative to usual “one sided” international trade efforts through the use of fair trade. “Fair trade bridges artisans need for income, retailers’ goal for transforming trade and consumers’ concerns for social responsibility through a compatible, non-exploitative, and humanizing system of international exchange” (Littrell and Dickson). Through fair trade networks, international trade is finally able to reach the producers in need throughout the developing world, providing them the opportunity to profit off of consumer desires around the globe.

Therefore this type of organization can use its main characteristics to access marginalized groups, such as women, to combat certain issues that these groups might face and to ultimately work towards improving their livelihoods in a more sustainable manner. “Better access to market outlets and stable prices are considered key principles for sustainable poverty reduction and stakeholder participation based on ‘trade not aid’”

(Ruben). With such a significant amount of women throughout the world living in poverty, the fair trade model has the ability to provide women throughout the developing world, and other marginalized groups, a sustainable option to drastically improve their well-being.

Fair Trade Impacting Women

Fair trade looks to empower and aid marginalized groups within developing societies to give them a voice and an impact within their economic systems. Historically one of the most marginalized groups around the world has been, and continues to be, women. Therefore, fair trade businesses can be an important way for women to get an opportunity to enter the economic market and ultimately become self-sufficient. “Some self-employed women producers in the global South have found that organizing collectively, and linking to Fair Trade markets, offers the potential for significant economic and social benefits” (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32). Fair trade not only provides economic participation opportunities for women, but it can also create empowerment through personal income, ultimately leading to more gender equality.

Producer groups of women artisans and farmers, who access local, regional or international markets on fair terms, can gain a valuable source of income. As well as contributing to household well-being, this can support broader processes of economic empowerment’ among women through giving them greater access to and control over economic resources and opportunities (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32).

Fair trade has the capabilities to empower women in more ways than one. Though stable and fair incomes are a huge advantage, women are also able to gain support systems, education, safety and skills through various methods of fair trade business. All of these

aspects can improve the livelihoods of women living in poverty throughout the developing world.

These fair trade markets and businesses allow women to either learn new skills or use pre-existing skills to make socially responsible products while earning a proper wage to therefore support themselves and possibly their families. Organizations such as Fair Trade USA are helping women to work in safe and proper environments that allow them the rights and possibilities to progress and become economically significant.

Women hired on Fair Trade farms and plantations are guaranteed access to health care, certain job rights, and freedom from harassment so that women are able to play a strong role in their families and in their coops. Fair Trade certified farms have empowered women through opportunities for education, leadership roles, and scholarships so that girls can imagine a future where they can be their own boss (Fair Trade USA).

Fair Trade USA is not the only organization looking to empower women, fair trade organizations all over the world are creating these opportunities that support women in business and that have the capabilities to further women's empowerment and development.

Whether it is through fair trade farming, coffee production or textiles, fair trade organizations can also be a catalyst in women controlling leadership positions. "Women with their own income experience benefits beyond the economic improvement" (Duerst-Lahti). Fair trade consequently has the potential to not only have economic power but can create significant change within other aspects of women's lives as well. "Women managing fair trade operations have substantial political power within their communities... and small fair-trade activity also has a strong impact upon women's sense of empowerment, ability to feed their households, and orientation to HIV and health generally" (Fair Trade's Economic, Political, & Social Effects on African Women). Fair

trade has the opportunity to take the idea of small socially responsible business and international trade to address many issues within women's development that are being perpetuated by gender discrimination and a lack of women's empowerment.

Critiques of Fair Trade

The ideology of fair trade is essentially meant to help marginalized producers in developing countries to profit from the international trading system and to ultimately improve their livelihoods; however, similar to most developmental efforts, fair trade is not without flaws. In recent years there has been considerable research conducted on many different aspects of fair trade, and while most data expresses positives of this industry some researchers remain critical. One of the most recent criticisms of fair trade is in regards to increasing corporate involvement within the fair trade system. According to the article by Darryl Reed, titled *What do Corporations have to do with Fair Trade? Positive and Normative Analysis from a Value Chain Perspective*, Reed argues that corporate involvement could have adverse effects for the northern economic actors who rely heavily on the sale of fair trade products. "As retailers they will now be in direct competition with large corporate retailers. This leaves open the possibility that they could be squeezed out of the market over time" (Moore 73-86). Therefore corporations selling fair trade items can essentially put smaller fair trade sellers, who are unable to compete, out of business. Another issue that this article argues is that corporations will adopt fair trade items in order to promote the fair trade ideology to give their own brand legitimacy, even if it doesn't live up to fair trade standards. This in the end can have adverse effects on the fair trade brand (Moore 73-86). With increasing partnerships between corporations

and fair trade organizations, fair trade organizations are risking autonomy and could potentially lose control over their efforts and social message, which could ruin the original purpose of the organization. These critiques of corporate involvement have occurred in many fair trade organizations today, mostly those that trade coffee since it is one of the largest and oldest forms of fair trade. Though these critiques can, and should, be addressed to fair trade clothing as well. The clothing sector is still relatively new and much smaller compared to the coffee sector, therefore fair trade clothing in particular has less experience with these corporate issues. As the fair trade clothing sector does continue to grow however, these issues will definitely need to be considered in order to keep fair trade clothing impactful.

Fair trade has also been criticized about its actual impacts on helping poor producers. With many different types of fair trade sectors all throughout the world, some sectors in particular are being questioned about whether or not they are helping those most in need. In particular fair trade coffee and farming have been known to operate in more successful developing countries while also ignoring the poorest producers within that region.

Higher prices from fair trade shifts demand to countries with wealthier producers and strong institutions. Most fair trade coffee comes from relatively rich developing countries like Mexico and Costa Rica...By contrast, Ethiopia has...very little fair trade certified coffee...purchased from here ("International Trade Centre").

In this circumstance, fair trade organizations can focus their business on wealthier countries that have stronger capabilities, leaving behind poorer nations that may not have the same production capacities. Getting access to the poorest producers is also a struggle; in regards to farming, the poorest workers do not have the resources and capabilities to be

a part of fair trade organizations, which can easily section off these potential producers. “The poorest segment of the farming community, however, is the migrant laborer who does not have the resources to own land and thus cannot be part of a cooperative” (Haight). Thus, fair trade farming is helping more middle-class producers instead of the poorest people who need it most. Consequently, even fair trade farms within sub-Saharan Africa are experiencing ethical issues. According to *Chocolate Nations*, which analyzes cocoa farming in West Africa, problems ranging from competitive markets to high costs prevent fair trade cocoa farming from being effective in improving the livelihoods of West African farmers.

Well-organised co-operatives or farmer groups can certainly make a big difference, making it easier for government and buyers to communicate with farmers and offer training and support. But in Ghana, the role played by co-operatives and Fairtrade in improving farmers lives has so far been limited...Far bigger factors than Fairtrade are shaping the country's cocoa industry (Ryan 82-119).

While these examples are mostly critiques of fair trade coffee and farming, the clothing sector can still be susceptible to many of these criticisms.

Fair trade dealing with artisans in particular, including fair trade clothing, can encounter many of their own issues as well. If artisans don't already run into issues with the lack of raw materials, creative spirit, and willingness to innovate, then “they can also meet and exceed the [fair trade organizations] demand for a broad range of cultural products” (Littrell and Dickson). Southern artisans making products to sell through fair trade, face many challenges within their own market as well as challenges between producers and the fair trade organization. Reliance on these fair trade organizations, which can impede self-sufficiency, is another risk that artisans can face. “Over time many artisan producer groups become solely dependent on [fair trade] orders, rather than

working towards self-sufficiency” (Littrell and Dickson). Therefore fair trade organizations can keep these artisans from expanding into their own economic markets and have the possibility to become reliant on the fair trade model. Adding on to these possible issues, fair trade clothing can also encounter organizational issues and well as retail issues that can keep them from fully accomplishing their mission.

With the combined potential problems between, artisans, retailers, and products, fair trade operations can quickly become ineffective and unsuccessful. However, most of these issues are avoidable and not necessarily detrimental and can be overcome with fair trade organizations properly addressing some of these concerns. Fair trade clothing can experience even more challenges due to the competitive nature of the fashion industry, within the United States specifically, yet due to the size and power of this industry, it can also allow for great growth and success for small businesses including fair trade.

Limitations in the Literature

The theory and practice of fair trade has been researched and analyzed many times before. Many researchers have addressed this type of business or organization, its positives and negatives and even what it can do for international development. The most common example to address these points is often discussed within fair-trade coffee, one of the most popular fair trade items today. There is also considerable amount of information of fair trade benefits to women within several different contexts. However, where the research is lacking is when you start to wonder more about specifics of the industry and whether it can address particular problems or issues. This thesis will detail background information and history but will also attempt to go beyond just how fair trade

can benefit women and ultimately express how it can specifically address ways to empower impoverished women in sub-Saharan Africa. Today, there are many organizations working to accomplish the same goal of using fair trade clothing to empower women and prevent poverty, however the literature and research rarely reflect these current businesses. Therefore throughout this thesis I will attempt to merge the secondary research with examples of current efforts that are directly applicable to obtain to a true understanding of fair trade efforts working to promote empowerment and how they are related to women in sub-Saharan Africa.

IV. Methodology

To answer the question; “is fair trade clothing an effective model to empower women in sub-Saharan Africa,” I am collecting data on three main independent variables, social, economic and political effects, to assess their importance within this question as well as the most effective model to carry out these variables. All of the three of these variables are then compared and contrasted using qualitative data. To achieve this, I am collecting previous research on the benefits of fair trade for women and applying it to how it can specifically and effectively be used to not only help women’s development but to also create empowerment.

This thesis includes examples and case studies of current organizations and businesses working to battle this problem and other similar models to address the best ways to use fair trade fashion to empower women in sub-Saharan Africa. The cases and examples within each variable will directly relate to that variable and their specific efforts in using this as way to empower women. There have been examples of businesses around the world working to help women, but the research has not been collected and analyzed to determine whether or not they are effective and sustainable. By comparing and contrasting several case studies in each section this allows me to determine the most effective methods and models in using fair trade fashion to benefit women. Based on these examples, a conclusion is determined about whether or not fair trade clothing is an effective and sustainable developmental model to empower women in sub-Saharan Africa.

Beyond the use of secondary sources I have included information based on my own previous experiences and observations while living in Cameroon. Living in West

Africa for several months allowed me to see first hand the struggles that women face and the everyday life of an African, which is represented throughout my findings. My experiences however have limited me since I did not specifically study fair trade clothing while living in Cameroon; therefore my research relies on secondary sources for specifics on this type of industry. Beyond the inability to travel throughout sub-Saharan African to conduct primary field research on this topic, I faced other limitations due to the lack of literature. Since fair trade clothing is such a small and relatively new sector within fair trade, there is very little literature discussing this specific industry, whether positive or negative. Due to this lack of literature it is all more important to analyze this sector to determine its current and future abilities to contribute aspects such as women's empowerment.

V. Findings

Economic Empowerment

After analyzing many secondary sources, the literature portrays evidence of extremely low economic participation opportunities for women in sub-Saharan Africa. “In the seven largest economies in Africa, the average participation of women in the labor force is 32.7%. Just over a third of women are actively involved in the production of goods and services, leaving a significant group of untapped potential outside the economy” (*Women of Africa*). However, gender inequalities are creating economic barriers, allowing women to only harness a portion of their actual economic abilities. “The general tendency in Africa is to regard women’s work as secondary or submissive to men” (“Women's International Network News”). Yet it has been proven time and time before that allowing women access to the economy can provide substantial benefits. “Creating opportunities for women to participate in the economy will improve their earning potential, assisting families to move out of poverty and contribute to the overall economy” (*Women of Africa*). Therefore the evidence collected and analyzed on economic benefits of fair trade clothing for women, express several specific strategies to address the issues of low economic participation for women in Africa.

Fair trade organizations are providing opportunities for producers all over the world to finally be able to tap into their local and international economies and are becoming economically empowered through the sale of their products. Fair trade clothing in sub-Saharan Africa consequentially harnesses that same ability to allow women an access point to finally become economically significant and take part in the international trading system. However, compared to other fair trade organizations such as coffee or

farming, clothing is a sector already dominated in sub-Saharan Africa by women. This ultimately provides for an easier and more effective transition for women producers. Using an industry that is already understood, known and culturally acceptable for women, can provide much greater benefits and creates easier accessibility for women to take part in economic activities.

While an access point for women to participate in their local economies is an important form of empowerment, it is not enough to lift someone fully out of poverty. One of the most influential economic benefits from fair trade is the impact of a fair and self-sustaining income. Working women in sub-Saharan Africa who have already struggled against gender inequalities and have worked hard to just access the economic market face yet another hurdle of obtaining a proper living wage. After dealing with numerous obstacles just to access the economic market, when women are finally able to get a job in sub-Saharan Africa the majority of the time it is within the informal sector, which usually cannot provide women with proper wages. Consequently, the few women who are able to work within the formal sector are still being paid considerably less than men, even for the same amount of work. “The wage gap between male and female employees consciously and sub-consciously reinforces the view that women are less valued than their male counterparts even when the same work is performed” (*Women of Africa*). On the other hand, through the use of fair trade, producers are able to obtain a proper living wage that can help them to provide for not only themselves but also their families. Though this argument is true for all fair trade organizations, the opportunity for a proper income remains one of the biggest factors for empowering women that can also apply to clothing sector. Using an industry that is culturally acceptable and provides more

accessibility for women in this region allows fair trade clothing to focus on lifting women out of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. Besides the obvious benefits of a proper income such as buying food, providing for children, and the ability to afford health services, women are also known for reinvesting their money to help out others as well. “Women usually reinvest a much higher part of their earnings in their families and communities than men, spreading wealth and creating a positive impact on future development” (*Women of Africa*). Other developmental efforts throughout this region, such as micro-finance, also experience larger benefits for the community when focusing their efforts on women in particular.

Children of women microfinance borrowers also reap the benefits, as there is an increased likelihood of full-time school enrolment and lower drop-out rates. Studies show that new incomes generated from microenterprises are often first invested in children’s education, particularly benefiting girls. Households of microfinance clients appear to have better health practices and nutrition than other households (“Small Change, Big Changes: Women and Microfinance”).

Therefore providing an income through fair trade clothing doesn’t just empower one woman, but can ultimately empower other women, children, and the whole population as well, essentially providing long-term and effective development to this region.

After further research on fair trade empowering women, the importance of a proper income becomes quite apparent. With a proper living wage being at the forefront of the ideology of fair trade, many organizations today focus on this aspect to help lift women out of impoverished living conditions all around the world. While many fair trade operations throughout the world are currently empowering women through a proper income, one example of an organization that addresses women in sub-Saharan Africa is *Shea Yeleen*. *Shea Yeleen* is an organization that produces shea butter by rural women in

West Africa. The founder, Rahama Wright, wanted to change the shea industry after seeing the women working such hard and long hours while earning insufficient wages.

Rahama Wright became extremely concerned with the challenges that the women were facing... Wright was disheartened by the fact that many of these hardworking women were not seeing the direct financial benefits of Shea butter sales. Thus making it difficult for them to provide for themselves and their families (Johnson).

Therefore Wright founded the fair trade organization, Shea Yeleen so that women producers had the opportunity to profit from their work in a fairer manner. Consequently, one of the immediate results from the creation of this fair trade organization was the income.

When Shea Yeleen starts working with the cooperatives, the members are able to increase their monthly incomes by between 80 – 130 percent. This is the difference between poverty and earning a living wage. This income allows women to pay for health care costs for their family, school fees for their children, and even costs to start their own small businesses,” said Wright (Johnson).

This immense increase in income provides strong reasoning as to why women in this region should connect with fair trade industries and how it can significantly benefit them. Shea Yeleen may use fair trade to help women producers of shea butter in sub-Saharan Africa, but the same issues can be addressed through connecting with women producers in fair trade clothing. Whether it's shea butter or clothing, producers are able to obtain more substantial wages through fair trade networks. Through partnering with organizations that ensure proper working wages while selling your products to larger and more profitable markets, producers can see vast benefits from these fair trade operations. Through a proper income, fair trade clothing can ultimately help many women out of impoverished situations in sub-Saharan Africa, in a similar way as Shea Yeleen.

While a fair working wage is an important aspect of all fair trade organizations, and an integral factor in determining how fair trade clothing can empower women, it is not a factor that sets clothing apart from other fair trade industries. Therefore a proper living wage does not make the fair trade clothing industry more effective in helping women than any other fair trade industry currently operating. However, the data suggests a different variable that was unique to only the clothing sector and that could allow for a much greater economic impact on women in particular. Through the skill of sewing, women in sub-Saharan Africa can be economically empowered through many different opportunities that this skill offers. The most important aspect of sewing is that women producing fair trade clothing are empowered through gaining knowledge of a sustainable skill set. Through learning the skill of sewing, women are able to participate economically within the fair trade business and are also able to gain a life long skill that can be used to generate income beyond just the fair trade operation. Whether these women already have this skill and are perfecting it, or are being taught it for the first time, this opportunity can impact women beyond that of the fair trade organization and can empower them economically for a much longer time after.

The use of sewing is even being used to address more specific problems that many women face throughout the world as well as in sub-Saharan Africa, such as prostitution. For some women, prostitution is a last resort to provide for not only themselves but sometimes even for their families. Many of these women have been impacted by prostitution at a young age and therefore have little education or knowledge of any business skills. However through fair trade clothing organizations, many of these girls and women are taught the skill of sewing to not only gain an income through the fair

trade operation but to gain a skill that can ultimately provide for them for the rest of their lives, ensuring that they never have to return to the dangers of prostitution in the future.

This growing global economic exchange between slave-turned-artisan and socially-conscious buyer is a marriage slowly changing the lives entangled in human trafficking-introducing women to economic power and therefore, freedom. Welcome to fair trade fashion (Groom, and Lowe).

Fair trade clothing has the ability to empower women in sub-Saharan Africa in many different facets. Through the skill of sewing, fair trade clothing can give women in sub-Saharan Africa an opportunity to greatly improve their lives and in some circumstances even save it.

Another advantage that clothing has over other fair trade industries is that sewing can be done at home. Unlike farming or coffee production, where your work has to be done in a specific place, sewing allows for much greater flexibility. Though it is important for women in sub-Saharan Africa to become more economically significant, their cultural roles are very central to their lives; meaning women are still ultimately responsible for household duties throughout much of Africa. It is important to try to empower women to slowly improve and change their lives for the better; however it is impossible to ignore cultural factors that still may influence the effectiveness of the organization. Therefore an advantage of fair trade clothing is that the skill of sewing allows for women to gain economic freedom without sacrificing their families. Being able to participate in the fair trade clothing network by sewing at home also allows women to take care of their children and family if needed. Having children to take care of at home might also prove to be a determining factor as to why some women do not get involved in economics activities outside the household. Fair trade clothing allows for women to join the work force while still maintaining their personal responsibilities and

provides these women with options and flexibility that they might not receive in other industries, fair trade or not.

MarketPlace is a current organization that is using the skill of sewing as an opportunity to help women in India improve their lives. The organization started as a small sewing project for women living in the slums of Mumbai, and has now turned into a fair trade organization selling handiwork from India to help empower women all over the country. The same benefits from the productions of textiles that MarketPlace is using to lift women out of poverty in India could additionally be implemented to improve the lives of women in Africa as well.

MarketPlace: Handwork of India grew from roots in a modest sewing project... Then, as now, empowerment of women and physically challenged individuals through raising their self-esteem, dignity, and self-sufficiency was a driving goal. Initial work focused on patchwork quilts, an endeavor appropriate to the women's resources and skills (Littrell and Dickson).

MarketPlace fulfills the same needs and empowerment issues for women only in a different setting and with the use of a different textile. Yet they still realize how they can improve these women's livelihoods by utilizing their skills of sewing and helping them to create a network through fair trade textiles. MarketPlace also depicts the immediate benefits that the women were able to gain through the power of the sewing.

Given the women's urgent need for income to support their families, lengthy training was neither feasible nor practical. Rather, the women's well-honed hand sewing skills provided an immediate opportunity for work. While working at home where they could look after their children, the women refined their skills, and production commenced. The sewing project grew quickly as the women's neighbors observed their work, inquired how much they were paid, and asked to join the group (Littrell and Dickson).

This description of MarketPlace provides evidence that through the skill of sewing women are able to gain numerous opportunities that can empower them economically.

First, MarketPlace shows that using an industry that women already know and have knowledge in provides for an easier and more effective startup for the business and offers immediate monetary benefits. Though this example is used in India, many women in the African culture already work as tailors or have knowledge of this industry, therefore providing a benefit for the use of fair trade clothing over another type fair trade industry. Still, women's knowledge of sewing is able to develop further, as described above, women were able to perfect their sewing skills and even if some women do not have this skill, the organization will teach them sewing skills to empower as many women as possible. MarketPlace also demonstrates the flexibility that sewing had for their organizations allowing these women to continue being mothers and care for their families. Overall, MarketPlace is a sufficient example of how to effectively empower women in many different ways specifically through the use of sewing and selling textiles or clothing. The same logic and ideas can be used to help empower other women around the world including women in sub-Saharan Africa.

After further research, several sources began to depict the larger economic opportunities that can be produced from fair trade clothing networks. Though the ultimate goal in this project is to determine how best to empower women through fair trade clothing, some data began to express how clothing also has the ability to empower more than women in Africa. Using indigenous products and textiles can allow for a much broader economic effect. From cotton farmers to fabric stores, a network of producers can be positively impacted through the sale of fair trade clothing.

There is large importance of using indigenous products within fair trade organizations to truly enable a larger network of producers to be positively impacted.

Using the example of clothing, women ultimately sewing the clothing to be sold are just the last section from a long line of producers and work that went into the creation of that piece of clothing. Therefore before these women receive the materials, first cotton had to be picked and gathered, and then processed into cloth, which then had to be dyed or printed which eventually goes stores or salesmen to sell that cloth which will then finally reach the women who will sew that cloth into a specific piece of clothing. Ultimately, if the fair trade organization is successful and creates a larger demand, then not only will the women sewing the clothing be empowered but the entire line of producers from that country can also feel the impacts of a higher demand for their products or services. Therefore it is imperative to use indigenous products within fair trade to obtain a significant economic impact for that nation.

Social Empowerment

Due to extreme gender inequalities throughout sub-Saharan Africa, the secondary research conveys a strong importance for fair trade to challenge women's roles within their societies and households. Culture has historically hindered developmental attempts in this region; therefore to successfully empower women in sub-Saharan Africa several social factors need to be addressed. Throughout this section, evidence of fair trade clothing challenging societal roles of women will be laid out, analyzing the concepts of community building, independence through income, and education to empower women in sub-Saharan Africa.

Women's societal roles throughout sub-Saharan Africa remain very traditional. Women are usually subordinate to men in most aspects of society and are solely

responsible for all domestic and household work. They take care of the children, fetch water for the family, make most meals and clean and care for the house. While the male works and brings the family what money he can, he is traditionally the decision maker for the family due to his control over the funds. With such set societal roles, it can be very challenging for development work to empower women and improve women's social status. However, fair trade clothing provides several outlets and support systems that can attempt to improve women's roles in this respect. One of the main ways that fair trade clothing is able to improve women's status is through the power of providing additional funds. As previously stated, generating a proper income is one of the most essential factors of a fair trade organization. Besides the many economic benefits, income can also empower women socially, improving their roles within the household and throughout society. By providing women the ability to make additional funds for their families, they have the opportunity to improve their standing in relation to their husbands. Women can be seen as more important within the household, which can increase their power within decision-making as well.

Many (women) noted that their earning power had given them higher status within the family. Married women felt their contribution to household income gave them more influence over decision-making within the household and community (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32).

An increase in decision-making roles, due to additional income generated from fair trade, can lead to significant social empowerment, allowing women to begin to change their gender roles throughout their society.

With an increase in income through fair trade efforts, women can greatly improve their status, challenging the traditional family roles. However, these effects go beyond just the household values and can even apply to single women within sub-Saharan Africa

as well. “[...] unmarried girls, are considered [in the region] a big expense burden on the family. Women are now seen as contributing to their families, a little exposure has given women courage to overcome their fear of men” (McArdle, and Thomas 277-294).

Throughout many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, unmarried women can be seen as burdens that can create embarrassment for their families. Therefore unmarried women have almost less respect and rights than married women throughout certain regions of sub-Saharan Africa. Yet providing additional income for single women can release them of this guilt of being a burden, and they can begin to provide for themselves, gaining more respect and self-worth as well. Therefore income through fair trade can help women in many different types of situations and can empower them to become more equal within their households and societies.

Improving women’s lives through domestic stability can also be a benefit of fair trade. Through an added income, families can remain together knowing there is additional income being provided by the mother. Therefore the family does not have to move around searching for work in order to make enough money to support the entire household. “In Uganda, it was reported the new income-earning opportunities for women allowed families to stay together in rural areas instead of having to move to find casual labour or petty trade work in urban areas” (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32). An added income can help families relieve stress and provide for a stronger household knowing that there will be enough money to support everyone. Allowing women an opportunity to work and gain their own income can also empower them to become more self-reliant, ultimately permitting change in gender roles within their society. Similar empowerment for women to become self-sufficient allowing them the ability to no longer rely on men,

and providing them influence over their own life choices, can also be seen within households. With women working, and now also providing money for the families, men can become more inclined to participate in domestic duties allowing women time to work and generate additional income. “Women...noted their husbands were helping more with domestic chores, freeing up women’s time for productive work” (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32). Therefore not only does fair trade have the ability to challenge gender roles within sub-Saharan Africa but it can also help families obtain a more harmonious and equal household providing for more stability.

What has changed? Co-operation in the family on decision-making... Women make decisions too. Women work for themselves and are self-reliant. Once we realized the benefits of working together we were motivated to work even harder (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32).

Generating social empowerment opportunities through fair trade clothing can provided changes in household behavior, ultimately leading to important improvements in women’s rights and roles throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

After further analysis, many secondary sources also express the importance of a community within fair trade clothing to empower women socially. Through the use of cooperation and a safe working environment, women can greatly benefit from a strong female group. Providing a communal working space with only females allows women to connect and use each other as support while learning from each other’s experiences. “For marginalized women...having a group with whom to voice their opinions and concerns helps in overcoming isolation and enhancing their access to social protection” (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32). With many women being seen as second to men, a group can allow them to connect with each other and empower one another through their own stories and experiences. This idea of a community in a workplace is currently being used

by several fair trade industries and should also be used in fair trade clothing organizations to help empower women in sub-Saharan Africa. MarketPlace, a textile fair trade organization out of India, uses a supportive workplace as a platform for their women.

...Creating a nonexploitative, supportive business environment in which women of different religions, ethnicities, and ages can gain energy and learn to work together is an underlying objective...In Mumbai, women of Hindu, Muslim and Christian faiths sew and embroider together, many talking with each other for the first time. Commonalties among the women emerge during animated discussions of early marriages, dashed hopes for education, and difficult home lives (Littrell and Dickson).

While MarketPlace uses their business as a support group for women in India, the same can be accomplished through fair trade clothing in sub-Saharan Africa. With women often being an afterthought within their homes and communities, it is very important to empower African women through collective support so that they can understand their self-worth.

Another aspect of empowerment through a supportive community can be seen in women's increased self-esteem. Being surrounded and supported by women who understand similar struggles can have a positive impact on how these women feel and perceive themselves. Improved self-esteem has been one of the largest impacts of fair trade on women, which is supported by the secondary research. Many current fair trade organizations focusing on women have expressed significant improvements of their self-esteem and self-worth. MarketPlace claims that empowerment "is reflected through women's expressions of heightened self-esteem and dignity" and gives examples of specific women's testimonials providing evidence of its impact (Littrell and Dickson).

What I value most is the fact that I have confidence in myself. I come to meetings...and everyone listens to what I have to say and I feel important. I have never felt like this before. And I see that other people in my life also respect me

more. I am changed. I have new friends. I hear new ideas and think about them. It is very exciting (Littrell and Dickson).

While MarketPlace shows significant impacts in empowering their artisans through these means, many other organizations are also seeing the benefits of a supportive community for women.

According to the journal article *Women producers and the benefits of collective forms of enterprise*, improved self-esteem “was perhaps the most widely reported benefit of women being members of an organization or group” (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32). This article also listed testimonials from current women around the world experiencing improvements in their self-esteem through a collective group.

When asked to describe the most significant change in her life, one Nicaraguan woman noted: ‘I used to feel afraid to express myself and had low self-esteem. (Now) I am responsible for managing the credit and I am respected in my community... To be able to recognize that I am an important woman, with rights and that I can decide for myself in life. Now I control the work in my home and its me who decides whether to get involved in projects that the cooperative offers’ (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32).

Through the use of collective and supportive work groups, it is evident that significant forms of empowerment can be accomplished. From self-reliance to self-esteem, these examples explain how important it is that women are able to come together to support and help each other to improve their lives. Therefore this is an extremely significant aspect that can, and should be represented within fair trade clothing organizations in sub-Saharan Africa. Without a support group for women producers, the amount of empowerment that this type of organization could achieve would be insignificant. Therefore it is a necessity that all fair trade clothing organizations empowering women provide a proper support system allowing the women producers to truly change their roles and importance within their societies.

On a different note, providing an educational forum within fair trade, can also greatly improve the livelihoods of women producers. “The ability to participate in education is a commonly reported positive consequence of involvement with fair trade” (McArdle, and Thomas 277-294). Fair trade clothing in particular can provide women education to learn skills such as sewing, which was discussed earlier, as well as business skills that may come along with this sort of industry. However fair trade clothing also has the ability to go beyond just these specific skill sets and can work in an education agenda to teach women producers about issues that they may face within society, helping them to overcome and learn how to better deal with these imperative issues. “Given that there exists a positive correlation between education and development...it can be argued that Fair Trade will have a direct impact on educational attainment and will be a positive developmental force for producers and their families” (McArdle, and Thomas 277-294). Though an educational aspect within fair trade can encompass many different types of subjects that women throughout sub-Saharan Africa come in contact with, one of the most impactful issues these women may potentially face is HIV/AIDS.

Though many efforts have, and continue to be made to help contain the spread of HIV, it remains to be one of the most severe problems within sub-Saharan Africa, greatly affecting the lives of many women. “The world Bank report of 2008 indicated that HIV/AIDS continues to be one of the greatest challenges to sexual and reproductive health in eastern and southern parts of the African continent” (Dibie, and Dibie 95-122). Therefore it is extremely important to take the time to educate and help as many women as possible to overcome or avoid this potential danger. While HIV/AIDS education has started using more effective and creative routes, such as teaching children through the use

of sports, or soccer in particular, fair trade clothing can also use its support system to provide women producers with this knowledge in a more comfortable and safe environment. "...Income and knowledge create a power shift in which women can take control over becoming infected with HIV" (Bernstein, Duerst-Lahti). Whether it's a one-hour a week workshop or something that women choose to discuss every day, health and safety education can easily be included into the fair trade sector which has the possibility to save many women's lives. Some women producers could be at risk more than others, since fair trade clothing can provide significant benefits to women who have previously been subjected to prostitution. It is therefore imperative that these women get the help and support that they need while providing them education about the dangers of reverting back to this industry. HIV/AIDS is an extremely important issue that is leaving children without parents every day in sub-Saharan Africa; therefore fair trade clothing owes these women help and support in order to keep them healthy as well as empowered.

Beyond an educational forum, women can become empowered to take control over their own sexual health through other aspects provided by fair trade clothing. With the help from a supportive and collective group, women are able to talk with each other about their own sexual health issues or questions, which provide them with more self-esteem to take control over their own sexual safety. According to the thesis *Fair Trade Cooperatives and Women's Empowerment: Impacts for US policy on Food Security and HIV*, the author conducted research and interviews with women producers in a fair trade organization in Swaziland to determine how they were empowered when it came to their control over HIV. One respondent stated, "Yes I can protect myself now. I feel more power to talk to my husband about wearing a condom because I talked to other women

here about it” (Bernstein, Duerst-Lahti). Other respondents made the point that the additional income also empowered them to make their own choices and didn’t have to rely on men, which could place them at risks to contract HIV.

Another respondent made the point that when you can earn your own money, you don’t need to ask for things, and therefore favors are not expected from you... ‘Now I have my own money and don’t have to beg because when you beg for things they expect sex. Now the money I need is in my hand.’ When women have the power and ability to refuse sex or make their partner wear a condom, they gain considerable control over their chance of HIV infection (Bernstein, Duerst-Lahti).

Therefore through several different benefits that fair trade provides, women can use these aspects to become empowered to control their sexual health. This is an extremely important aspect that needs to be included within fair trade clothing because the ability for these women to take control over their sexual safety doesn’t just improve their lives but can ultimately save them.

Political Empowerment

The obstacles that limit women’s abilities and opportunities in sub-Saharan Africa go far beyond the economic and social challenges. Being such a widely marginalized group, women face extreme limitations within the political sector in this region as well. “The few studies that mentioned gender helplessness in sub-Saharan African countries argue that gender does shape the opportunities and constraints women and men face in securing positions in the government” (Dibie, and Dibie 95-122). Whether its challenges being represented within government agencies to the legal status and rights for women; throughout sub-Saharan Africa, women are widely disregarded in many aspects of the political sphere. However, recent progress is being made in several countries throughout this region, most notably in Liberia, and the benefits of women entering the political

sphere are becoming more and more obvious. With the first female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, being democratically elected in Liberia, immense progress and improvements in all spheres has been observed throughout her country. Therefore it is important more now than ever that women in sub-Saharan Africa are empowered politically and are able to be represented fairly throughout their society. Though fair trade cannot change every political aspect throughout sub-Saharan Africa, it can address the lack of political power women currently represent throughout this region and can provide women the opportunity and a platform to change their own political and social statuses.

Throughout my research, many secondary sources display the ability for women to gain decision-making roles through fair trade organizations. These decision-making roles are very important for women since they are ultimately platforms where women can create change and speak their minds. However in sub-Saharan Africa, women's gender roles have historically prohibited them from gaining these important positions throughout their societies, keeping them subordinate to male leaders and perpetuating women's lack of rights throughout this region. "When women are not adequately represented in decision-making levels, their rights and freedoms may be violated" (Njogu, and Orchardson-Mazuri). Recently many fair trade organizations have observed this issue for women and are now using their networks to help provide women the necessary support to gain these coveted positions. Beyond learning skills of sewing, women have the ability to also learn many entrepreneurial skills that are represented in the fair trade business.

The research suggested that belonging to an organization gave many of the women access to information and marketing support, often making better decisions about whom to sell their goods to, at what price and women giving them greater bargaining power to make demands (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32).

From management to trade, women can be empowered by learning many different business aspects that can help them to obtain more significant working positions in their future. Gaining these types of skills are necessary for women to obtain higher decision-making positions within their society, and fair trade clothing is a good way to facilitate education while providing skills and business knowledge for these women.

Another important benefit that women gain from working in a fair trade business is the power of leadership.

The leadership that has emerged over the years has been amazing. Women have been able to assume these newfound roles without upsetting the family structure. They have taken up learning computers with such zeal and without the slightest inhibition, and they have assumed leadership roles like they were born with them. They have collaborated and disagreed but always kept the group welfare in mind when resolving conflict (Littrell and Dickson).

Through leadership roles, women can feel more self-confident and empowered to use these leadership skills outside of the fair trade sector. “Women reported they had gained confidence to enter into economic activities that are traditionally the domain of men” (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32). Without fair trade, most women can feel that they are not good enough or do not compare to men when it comes to obtaining decision-making roles within society. However if women are able to learn within the comfort of a fair trade organization and work to build their leadership skills, they might feel more confident to apply for tougher positions, including ones within the government sector based off of their newfound knowledge.

Through a collective group, fair trade can also become a platform for the organization to band together and advocate for certain beliefs. Women producers within fair trade organizations have the ability to fight for their rights and values creating a stage for political and social change. All fair trade organizations, especially fair trade clothing,

have this same ability to become apart of civil society. Representatives of a fair trade forum, Malikarjuna Iytha and Sujata Godswami, in India, emphasized the importance of social goals that go beyond financial assistance to help empower sustainable change for these women.

...Giving women some degree of financial autonomy will not necessarily alter traditional roles or norms within communities. There is also a need to support women to develop the capabilities and confidence to analyze, organize, and mobilize for social change. Including socio-political objectives in the guiding mission of the collective, was therefore, said to be important by many representatives of participating groups at the workshop (Jones, Smith, and Wills 13-32).

Applying a socio-political objective to fair trade efforts provides women producers the opportunity to gain political power within their communities as well as support causes hopefully instilling positive changes within the country as well. Currently many women throughout sub-Saharan Africa do not have the confidence or knowledge to obtain this sort of power, however through the use of education, leadership skills, and supportive groups provided by fair trade, women throughout sub-Saharan Africa can change this lack of political empowerment. This activism aspect should be included in any fair trade clothing operation within sub-Saharan Africa in order for these women producers to come together and fight for their own rights and beliefs within their countries.

According to *Show the World to Women and They Can Do It: Southern Fair Trade Enterprises as Agents of Empowerment*, women within a fair trade organization in Bangladesh are using their new collective power to address specific gender inequities and challenges within their local communities, specifically the issue of dowries.

Where village life is very restrictive to women in Bangladesh, the group can support actions directed at overcoming structural limitations placed on their mobility and/or practices, which they consider unfair. Dowery is one such issue and the pressure to pay dowery came up in many conversations...(therefore)

Some for the fair trade producer groups were taking collective action where the action of a sole woman would be difficult to maintain (Le Mare 95-109).

Similar to this fair trade organization in Bangladesh, fair trade clothing can be a platform allowing women to express their thoughts and act upon those establishing political and social changes within their societies. While this organization in Bangladesh started with smaller and more cultural issues, this same article discussed another group located in the capital of Dhaka, which took their collective political power even further.

They spoke with pride about taking part in public demonstrations and marches, for example one on women's rights. The women said they would not have attempted this activity without first being a member of the producer group. Such collective activity was a new experience for them and a radical one where most women are excluded from the public arena (Le Mare 95-109).

While most of these examples come from fair trade organizations within Bangladesh, they can still apply to fair trade clothing in sub-Saharan Africa. Women in this region are also extremely marginalized and though they might not share the issue with the dowry specifically, they still face a lack of representation within civil society working to fight many cultural, social, and political issues that are perpetuating gender inequalities. Fair trade clothing in this region can therefore lead to significant social and political changes for these women, as long as the women producers are able to successfully collectivize and use their organization to gain power through the group and stand up and finally fight for what they believe in and deserve. Therefore fair trade clothing can be more than a business for these women but can ultimately be a vehicle in empowering these women to fight for their rights and freedoms.

It was only 10 years ago that a group of women in Liberia created a peace movement in order to stop the abduction of children to use as soldiers and the rape of women throughout the country from the Liberian Civil War. Due to collective action,

these women were not only able to put an end to the 14 year long Liberian Civil War, but they ultimately paved the way for a changed Liberia, propelling the first African woman president to be elected. Liberia is the first country to achieve this type of progress, but hopefully not the last. Therefore it is important for women to collectively get together and stand up for their rights in order to make a difference. Fair trade clothing can provide the small step in collectivizing women, educating them and giving them the support that they need to achieve success, which not only benefits themselves and other women but can potentially change the entire country for the better, as seen in Liberia.

While Liberia's example displays the positive outcomes of bringing women together and providing them a platform, their story also explains how positive leadership can truly change a country. Though fair trade may not create many future women presidents, it can demonstrate the advantages and benefits of women in leadership positions. Women in fair trade can take their newfound skills and not only advocate for equal gender representation but can even obtain more significant decision-making positions throughout their societies, signifying a change within their governments. When women have finally accomplished these significant positions they have the ability to give back and create change paving a better life for other women within their society.

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has historically advocated for helping women within Liberia and understands the importance of women within the market economy.

She mentioned that Liberia's market women need her special attention... She is aiming to reconstruct the markets that were destroyed during the war and thereby grow a literally market-based economy. This work with local women to stimulate self-reliance reminded me how essential it is that political leaders, no matter what is happening at international or national levels, recognize the importance of improving conditions in people's daily lives (Maathai 95-131).

Therefore not only did Ellen Johnson Sirleaf acknowledge the importance of women working within the economy, but she is also dedicated to working to improve the lives of women throughout Liberia. Fair trade clothing can be this stepping-stone for many women throughout sub-Saharan Africa to gain knowledge and confidence, which could potentially propel them to obtain higher working positions eventually instilling similar change and progression, as is the current president of Liberia.

VI. Conclusion

This is one of the first studies bridging the efforts of fair trade clothing to empower women with examples of how its efforts can effectively address many current issues for women in sub-Saharan Africa. In answering the question, “is fair trade clothing an effective model to empower women in sub-Saharan Africa,” the findings suggest that there are several different ways that fair trade clothing can effectively empower women economically, socially, and politically throughout this region. The literature reflects my hypothesis that fair trade clothing does have the capabilities to significantly influence women’s empowerment but is most effective and sustainable when addressing several different issues women in this region face. The findings confirm the many benefits women gain from joining a fair trade clothing organization, while this organization can provide women in sub-Saharan Africa immense opportunities that they may not have had previously in order to greatly improve their lives. However, beyond women’s empowerment my findings even expressed a larger and more significant impact that can be seen throughout the continent of Africa. Fair trade clothing has endless possibilities, and if organized correctly, the simple item of clothing has the opportunity to influence many different people, lifting more than just women out of poverty. Fair trade clothing can ultimately create a web of benefits stretching from women producers in Cameroon, to cotton farmers in Mali, to fashion designers in South Africa and to even the final seller working in ecotourism in Tanzania. Therefore, from the information that I have analyzed, fair trade clothing doesn’t only effectively empower women in sub-Saharan African but it can create a chain of benefits for many people throughout all of Africa.

Though my findings indicate that fair trade clothing can be an effective model to empower women in sub-Saharan Africa, evidence also displayed the many imperfections within fair trade as well. I have also concluded that though fair trade clothing does include aspects that are different from other fair trade sectors, allowing for greater impacts on women, it is still a fair trade organization and therefore shares many of its general benefits and problems. Fair trade is not without flaws and neither is fair trade clothing, and the literature portrayed several critiques that can also be applied to the clothing sector. However, fair trade clothing has shown to be a better alternative in some circumstances than traditional aid, therefore my findings have shown that currently fair trade clothing's positives outweigh its negatives and thus can be used to empower women throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

Though I have concluded my findings regarding fair trade clothing's effects on women in sub-Saharan Africa, my work is still significantly limited. As stated previously, the main limitation to my research, and also the most significant in regards to collecting data, was the fact that I had to rely on secondary sources. Since I was unable to personally travel throughout sub-Saharan Africa conducting interviews and surveys regarding this topic, I had to solely depend on using previous literature while merging my own previous experiences and observations while living in Cameroon. This is also a substantial limitation in that there is very little research regarding fair trade clothing, which made collecting sources very difficult and had an effect on my overall findings and conclusion.

Another limitation regarding literature is that fair trade organizations usually have very complex and unorganized accounts and records making it difficult to analyze the

true impacts of fair trade. This was even more severe within clothing sector, since it is extremely difficult to find specific statistics on this industry. I therefore relied mainly on literature that analyzed current fair trade organizations that shared similar characteristics to the clothing sector and that could result in similar impacts.

Researching such a specific and new industry was definitely a limitation in regards to finding an accurate conclusion. Clothing is currently a very small sector within fair trade but it is growing in popularity, therefore some of the conclusions I made based off of this research could certainly change in the near future. Because it is still a smaller industry, clothing has not faced as many issues as other sectors have, such as coffee, however that doesn't mean that it will forever remain as effective as I see it today. Therefore choosing an uprising industry not only affects the amount of data to analyze but it can also provide a challenge in developing an accurate conclusion.

Because fair trade clothing is such a new and under-analyzed industry, a lot more research still needs to be conducted. Future research should look closer into each of my findings in a more quantitative way to determine the true effects of fair trade clothing. There are many organizations currently working to empower women through fair trade clothing so future exploration should use primary research to look into a few specific organizations and their impacts on women in sub-Saharan Africa. Though I chose to focus on Africa due to my previous experiences, it would also be interesting to see how fair trade clothing has affected women in other developing regions such as Asia or South America. I also think it is very important to look into the fair trade clothing sector within a few years to determine if it is still as effective as I see it now.

In the end this research has proven that if done properly, fair trade clothing has the ability to significantly change women's lives throughout sub-Saharan Africa for the better. From learning how to sew, African women are gaining more than just an income; they are essentially gaining their freedom. And it is with this newfound freedom that fair trade clothing can finally change disempowerment from being Africa's most unrecognizable problem into not even a problem at all, just one stitch at time.

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